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ABSTRACT

The closeness of the 2000 presidential election clearly demonstrated that the country was divided philosophically and politically. The authors of this paper, a speech communication professor and a political science professor at Westminster College in Missouri, capitalized on that division based upon their diametrically opposed political views by collaborating to team teach a course in political communication. The paper touches upon a unique approach in teaching such a course and focuses on the capstone assignment--an on-campus presidential campaign leading up to the November election. It explains the campaign assignment, discusses how students were prepared, reviews media use for dissemination of messages, and evaluates the project. The paper also offers some general thoughts on team teaching and gives an overview of the political communication class, where the educators' goals for their students included development of skills and competencies in campaign development, persuasion tactics, audience analysis, and public relations. (NKA)

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Team Teaching Political Communication: The 2000 Campus U.S. Presidential Campaign

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The 2000 presidential election was one of the closest and most controversial in U.S. history. Pregnant chads, confusing ballots, accusations of voter fraud and media bias, a questionable Supreme Court decision, and a popular-vote winner ultimately losing the election contributed to a memorable and bizarre outcome. It clearly demonstrated that the country was divided philosophically and politically. While no one could have predicted the end result, national polls preceding the election indicated all along that it would be a close and fiercely contested match. The authors of this article, a speech communication professor and a political science professor, were able to capitalize on that division based, at least in part, upon our own diametrically opposed political views by collaborating to team teach a course in political communication. The purpose of this article is to touch upon a unique approach in teaching such a course and to focus on our capstone assignment--an on-campus presidential campaign leading up to the November 7, 2000 election.

One result of requiring students to participate in a group election campaign project is an awareness of timely political issues and respective party platforms. This awareness, therefore, can enhance abilities to better articulate and defend ideological and political positions. Our goals for the students in Political Communication included development of skills and competencies in campaign development, persuasion tactics, audience analysis, and public relations. In this article we will explain the campaign assignment, discuss how students were prepared, review media use for dissemination of messages, and evaluate the project.

GENERAL THOUGHTS ON TEAM TEACHING

Team teaching is a multifaceted endeavor. Goetz (2000) defines team teaching as "a group of two or more teachers working together to plan, conduct and evaluate the learning activities for the same group of learners." According to Maroney (1999), several categories of this pedagogical

approach exist based upon the division of work and classroom responsibilities. We chose the traditional mode:

> . . . traditional Team Teaching [takes place when] both teachers actively share the instruction of content and skills to all students. . . . In Traditional Team Teaching both teachers accept equal responsibility for the education of all students and are actively involved throughout the class period (Maroney).

Since both of us were fairly knowledgeable regarding current political issues and the two candidates' respective positions, significant class time was spent with our co-leading discussions as opposed to straight individual lecture (though each of us did occasionally resort to the latter for the sake of coverage and perspective from our disciplines of political science and speech communication). These discussions often led to informal class debate, which also included participation from both instructors. We believed this was beneficial as the students were put in a position of having to assess the logic of their own arguments.

Other issues that arise with team teaching include dealing with the differences of teaching philosophies, decisions on learning outcomes, and how the material should be synthesized, analyzed, applied, and graded (Davis, 1997). These concerns were addressed by way of thorough preparation, discussion, and negotiation well before the semester began. We found quickly that, unlike our political views, our teaching styles and philosophies were very similar which immensely simplified the process. We would add, nonetheless, that differing pedagogical ideals need not interfere with the educational procedure. Regardless of whether there are similar or contrasting styles and beliefs between the professors, team teaching offer several advantages:

> Team teaching can open a student's eyes to accepting more than one opinion and to acting more cooperatively with others. . . . Exposure to the views of more than one teacher permits students to gain a mature level of understanding knowledge; rather than considering only

one view on each issue or new topic brought up in the classroom, two or more varying views help students blur the black-and-white way of thinking common in our society, and see many shades of gray (Goetz, 2000).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION CLASS

Because of the timing of our course offering, we focused the much of the course content on presidential political communication--public speaking, debates, commercials, the media, public relations, and group communication. During presidential campaigns, C-SPAN periodically airs presidential and vice-presidential debates from past elections that we taped and used for various class assignments. We also obtained a number of political ads from previous years to analyze and compare to the present-day ads.

The first day of class began with students completing our survey to determine political affiliations, preference of candidates, positions on issues, and some basic knowledge of national and Missouri State government. The students of Westminster College tend to lean in the conservative direction. Since we assumed the class would overwhelmingly favor Bush, our original plan was to break students into four five-member groups, each charged with campaigning for one of the top four national candidates--Bush, Gore, Ralph Nader, and Pat Buchanan--whether the students personally supported them or not. We were ecstatic to find, however, our questionnaire revealed that the twenty students who enrolled in Political Communication seemed to be as divided in their political opinions as the rest of the country. The results indicated 45% of our class planned on voting for Al Gore, 45% supported George W. Bush, and 10% were undecided (Political Communication class survey, 2000). Therefore, we concluded it would be best to allow the students the luxury of campaigning for the candidate they actually supported, and that such an approach could promote a more intense effort for this assignment. Both "undecided" students chose to join the Bush camp.

Presidential politics can dizzy constituents with a breadth and depth of topic areas that can be overwhelming to the average American citizen. Our survey asked students to rank the six most important political issues facing the candidates. For the sake of feasibility (and sanity), the campaign assignment would be limited to the top six as chosen by our students. Each side was broken into two smaller subcommittees with each taking three of the issues. They were, in no particular order, abortion, education, taxes, crime, environment, and guns.

THE ON-CAMPUS CAMPAIGN ASSIGNMENT

Our assignment was created to help students understand and experience the process of researching, framing, and implementing a political campaign through various campaigning techniques. Since much of politics parallels public relations, we used John Marston's (1963) four-step PR campaign process of RACE--Research, Action and Planning, Communication, and Evaluation--as a general template for the student campaigns to follow. Obviously, a huge difference between PR and political campaigns would be that all-important electoral outcome. A primary goal of public relations is to facilitate a positive public opinion (Baskin, Aronoff, & Lattimore, 1997) while the political campaign seeks not only to actuate the public to vote for a particular candidate, but also to persuade other members of the public to do the same (Moffitt, 1999).

The assignment was broken into two parts: a written team report explaining and demonstrating implementation of the RACE process, and an oral segment, a public debate in support of the groups' respective candidates the day before the election. The written and oral sections were each worth 50% of the grade. Students were evaluated individually for the debate while the report yielded a single group grade.

While following the RACE process, the written team report was to contain the following:

(a) research--surveys and their results along with interpretations of those results,

(b) action and planning--a written report previewing the group's plan of action,

(c) communication--a portfolio with demonstrations of that plan: original copies of published opinion pieces or news stories, copies of reports, memos, posters, etc., sent to or made available to the campus community,

(d) evaluation--surveys and their results, interpretations of these results regarding the success of actions taken as a campaign group,

(e) a bibliography of all published sources consulted/cited, and of all interviews conducted

In preparation for this task we provided our students with examples of campaign strategies through various media outlets. As previously stated, we presented, discussed, and analyzed videos of television ads beginning with the Eisenhower years through the current Bush-Gore commercials. In addition, students were exposed to news and editorial tactics of print and Web site information. Campaign slogans on posters, buttons and bumper stickers were also discussed. We then invited Eric Feltner, campaign manager for 9th District (MO) Congressman Kenny Hulshof, to address our class about proactive, reactive, and negative campaign strategies.

Group Research

Before conducting an effective campaign, the students needed to assess how members of the Westminster College community felt about the candidates and the six issues that would be covered. Our Gore camp found that 35% favored Bush with Gore a close second at 33%, but with 24% still undecided (Jones, Ladley, Murphy, & Tsaloufis, 2000). Predictably, the Bush team's poll had Bush ahead of Gore by a wide margin, 56-39% (Hixon, Hoffman, McConnell, Ritter, Ryel, & Vaquerano, 2000). In spite of this, the same survey indicated liberal attitudes on several of the six campaign issues. For example, 75% of campus Republicans supported hate-crime legislation, and 68% favored handgun licensing (Hixon et al, 2000). According to this survey, the campus Bush

supporters agreed more with Gore's positions but did not like Gore, the man. Since Bush was the campus front-runner, clearly, character was an issue the Gore camp needed to confront.

Planning

Both camps devised general plans to communicate their positions to the Westminster College community. Since this was an on-campus campaign (and with only 700 students, Westminster is a very small campus), the modes of reaching students, faculty, and staff were limited, yet effective. Posters, e-mail, flyers, and articles in *The Columns* (Westminster's student newspaper) would be obvious tools for the student groups to get their respective messages across. The groups researched their respective candidates' positions on the six class issues and readied themselves for proactive messages, a little negative campaigning, and reaction to the negative communication.

Communication

During the last week of September numerous "Bush" and "Gore" posters and flyers began to surface in strategic locations and high-traffic areas such as the student union, classroom buildings, restrooms, and on the windshields of automobiles. At first, there were simple recognition posters. Soon after, e-mails and flyers outlining the candidates' positions were distributed, and an issue of *The Columns* contained several news stories and opinion pieces--almost in point-counterpoint fashion--written by students in our class representing both candidates. By the start of October, the negative campaigning began as posters and flyers attacking opponents' positions became more prevalent.

Such methods of message distribution were common until the election. However, thanks to an October campus visit by Republican Vice Presidential candidate Dick Cheney, our students became even further involved with their respective campaigns.

Ever since Winston Churchill's famous Iron-Curtain speech ("The Sinews of Peace") on March 5, 1946, Westminster College has attracted numerous world leaders--from Ford to Reagan to Gorbachev to Thatcher to Walesa. As a result of a special invitation from College President Fletcher Lamkin, on Wednesday, October 11, Cheney came to Fulton for a campaign speech. (It should be noted that Democratic VP candidate, Joseph Lieberman, was also invited for the same purpose, but declined.) Our class Bush camp got involved with helping in the setup wherever possible. The Gore camp participated in organizing a campus "counter statement" during which time students and faculty would hold signs and distribute literature promoting Gore's candidacy while Cheney's campaign speech took place in the historic Westminster Gymnasium.

Naturally, Cheney's visit got a lot of local media attention while the dozens of "protesters" got some extended coverage as well. Stories and pictures on both aspects of Cheney's visit appeared in the *Fulton Sun-Gazette*, the *Columbia Daily Tribune*, and the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. In addition, local TV stations KMIZ (ABC) and KOMU (NBC) of Columbia each led with both the speech and protest during their 6 p.m. newscasts that day. A couple of our class students were quoted in several newspapers while the two television stations interviewed another.

As the campus campaign wound down, our class featured, as part of the assignment, a public debate on November 6, the day before the election. For two hours, a 30-member audience watched our students answer questions and provide rebuttals on why audience members should vote for the groups' respective candidates. Again, the media found this to be newsworthy as the debate story was covered by local TV (KRCG, the Columbia CBS affiliate). The *Fulton Sun-Gazette*, *The Columns*, and the Westminster Web site also featured articles and/or pictures of the event. It should be noted that both sides were obviously well prepared as they defended and championed their candidates' proposals and views admirably.

Evaluation

Obviously, a campaign is judged most on the success of its outcome. Our students completed their assignments by conducting another poll just before the national election. As was the case with the initial survey, the numbers differed. The Bush camp's survey indicated that 60% planned to vote for Bush with 31% for Gore (Hixon et al. 2000). This was an increase in Bush support from the 56% in the September campus poll. The Gore camp's post campaign poll showed Bush ahead 46% to 41 % (Jones et al. 2000). The latter seemed to be a more realistic result as the college's online election yielded a 48%-40% Bush victory. However, both sides concluded that while minds didn't change much, the interest level increased dramatically. According to one student who was not a class member, "I thought it was a good idea to get students in olved in the presidential campaign. I've never seen other students participate so actively in a political campaign before, which got me interested in what was going on, too." (Jrolf, 2000)

FOLLOW-UP

We earlier stated that our pedagogical goals in this assignment were for students to become familiar with the processes of preparing, implementing, and evaluating a political campaign. We believe that was accomplished right down to the frustrations our students experienced when their posters had been removed or vandalized. But the assimilation of speech and political science along with critical-thinking skills was, in our opinion, equally important. This concept was addressed by one of our students in an article printed in *The Columns*:

> I don't think our campaigning changed many votes. But I do think it helped the class become more involved in learning about the platform issues. Researching for the debate strengthened my political positions by forcing me to become educated about the opponents' side (Jrolf, 2000).

It was also a new experience for most of the students to enroll in a team-taught class. A student summarized the experience by stating, "Having two professors was difficult at first. But it was helpful for this particular subject to have professors that are knowledgeable about politics and have differing viewpoints" (Jrolf, 2000).

We will continue to make progress toward improving the political communication course. We believe, however, that our general approach of team teaching from an interdisciplinary and ideological perspective coupled with the hands-on technique for student campaign involvement has been proven to be an extremely successful method of teaching this course.

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